

American Community Survey (ACS)

Why We Ask: Ancestry

We ask about a person's ancestry to identify the ethnic origins of the population. These statistics are needed to measure the characteristics of ethnic groups and to tailor services to accommodate cultural differences.

A question about ancestry first appeared on the long form of the Census of 1980, replacing an earlier question on parental place of birth. Ancestry refers to a person's ethnic origin or descent, "roots," or heritage, or the place of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States.

13 What is this person's ancestry or ethnic origin?

(For example: Italian, Jamaican, African Am., Cambodian, Cape Verdean, Norwegian, Dominican, French Canadian, Haitian, Korean, Lebanese, Polish, Nigerian, Mexican, Taiwanese, Ukrainian, and so on.)

The questions as they appear on the 2016 ACS paper questionnaire. This topic was introduced on the Decennial Census of 1980, and was transferred to the ACS when it replaced the Decennial Census long-form in 2005.

Examples of Federal Uses

- Required to identify vulnerable populations which may be at disproportionate risk of experiencing limitations in health care access, poor health quality, and suboptimal health outcomes.
- Required to enforce against discrimination in education, employment, voting, financial assistance, and housing.
- Used in many reporting and research tasks to investigate whether there are differences by ancestry in education, employment, home ownership, health, income and many other areas of interest to policymakers.

Examples of Other Uses

State and local agencies use these statistics to understand the needs of all the groups in their communities over time. Some social, economic, or housing trends may have different impacts for different ancestry groups; understanding these changes may highlight future social and economic challenges. Advocacy groups use statistics about specific ancestry groups to understand current and future challenges and to advocate for policies that benefit their groups.